

VZCZCXRO0193
RR RUEHGI RUEHTRO
DE RUEHNJ #0446/01 1501447
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 301447Z MAY 07
FM AMEMBASSY NDJAMENA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5322
INFO RUEHAR/AMEMBASSY ACCRA 0473
RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 0916
RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO 0824
RUEHGI/AMEMBASSY BANGUI 1367
RUEHDK/AMEMBASSY DAKAR 1297
RUEHKM/AMEMBASSY KAMPALA 0373
RUEHKH/AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM 0434
RUEHPC/AMEMBASSY LOME 0551
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1681
RUEHNR/AMEMBASSY NAIROBI 0693
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 2940
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2161
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RUEHYD/AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE 1535
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0975
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0919

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 NDJAMENA 000446

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CHAD ELECTION DIALOGUE: A POSSIBLE OPPORTUNITY?

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Discussions on electoral reform are moving forward between the Mouvement Patriotique de Salut (MPS), Chad's ruling party, and the opposition. Agreement could come in the next weeks. Even diehard critics of the regime see promise that the talks could lead toward a more inclusive and transparent electoral process in Chad. Other political party and civil society leaders nevertheless feel that many of the issues that caused problems in the May 2006 elections and previous attempts at national dialogue remain unresolved.

Depending on the results of the talks, the USG should be ready to assist in preparations for elections and a new census. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) The MPS and allied parties, together with leading opposition groups, launched an inter-Chadian dialogue in April on reforming the electoral process before the next legislative and communal elections. 17 political parties (nine in ruling party; eight in the opposition) have been involved, spurred on by the European Union's local mission. Key players in the drafting committee include Jean Alingue, Saleh Kebzabo, and Salibu Garba from the Chadian opposition and Mahamat Hissein, cabinet director in the Presidency. A document with the agreed conclusions was due for release at the end of May; it is still expected to be completed soon, perhaps as soon as next week.

Areas of Agreement...

¶3. (SBU) The discussions have already made progress on several issues that have proved insurmountable in the past. The Commission Electorale Nationale Independante (CENI), the commission responsible for holding elections, will be reconstituted to have an equal number from the ruling party and the opposition, i.e., 15 members from each side. The electoral code will be revised, including arrangements for voting by nomads and Chadians living overseas. Steps will be taken to improve the general environment for the elections, including assuring access to the media and the neutrality of

the Constitutional Council and Supreme Court. All parties also agree on carrying out a new election registration exercise.

...But Other Issues Still Unresolved

14. (SBU) Other issues are proving more difficult to resolve. One involves the participation of the armed opposition. The draft document shared with us calls for a cease fire and a national dialogue that would include the Chadian armed rebel movements. The Chadian government has categorically rejected such proposals in the past. According to drafting committee member and opposition representative Salibu Garba, this time the government has provided assurances that it would accept language appealing for an inclusive dialogue. For his part, EC Ambassador Gilles Desequelles has told us that the involvement of the armed opposition is non-starter.

15. (U) Also unresolved is the question of the long-delayed national population census. The last one took place in 1993; a new one would delay the next elections into 2009. Opposition representatives are nevertheless insisting on doing so. They maintain that otherwise there will be no way of accurately defining the legislative districts or drawing the boundaries for the local districts. EC Ambassador Desequelles has taken a public stand advising against making a new census a precondition for future elections. In his view, a census is not necessary for organizing credible elections. Worse, he is concerned this would require

NDJAMENA 00000446 002 OF 003

extending the mandate of National Assembly deputies, last elected in 1992, at least another two years, further diminishing the National Assembly's credibility.

Complaints About Being Left Out

16. (SBU) Civil society groups and other political parties are less pleased with the election dialogue. Vincent Danebaye, vice president of RPR-Lingui, has spoken out against the Coordination des Partis politique pour la Defense de la Constitution (CPDC), the main association of opposition parties, for accepting a dialogue that does not include other political actors. He objects to the CPDC's position in favor of organizing a full national census. He complains that this will prolong the mandate of the current deputies far too long.

17. (SBU) In a discussion with PolOff May 17, civil society leader Delphine Kemneloum confided that many civil society groups viewed the latest national dialogue as potentially harmful to the cause of democracy and human rights in Chad. She protested that civil society groups have been left out of the process. She accused most political parties of only looking out for themselves and of having failed to improve the country. Even worse, she claimed, some political parties have even facilitated corruption. In her view, if civil society groups were a part of the debate on election reform, they could help in encouraging Chadians to vote in a proper election.

18. (SBU) Speaking with the Ambassador May 21, EC Ambassador Desequelles explained that he had sought the participation of civil society groups in his initial efforts to jumpstart the election reform dialogue. This is how it had been done during his time seeking to promote dialogue and elections in Togo, his previous assignment. In Chad it was the opposition party representatives, he noted, who had refused to permit their participation.

Challenges and Motivations

¶9. (SBU) Even if the differences on the census and the role of the armed opposition can be resolved, several challenges remain. Carrying out a new census, along with a voter registration exercise, will cost money and take time. Postponing the elections, already rescheduled several times, will not necessarily ensure that the opposition will accept the results of the census or implementation of the electoral reforms. Holding elections will be problematic as long as the armed rebellion in eastern Chad persists. Still, the sad record of electoral reform initiatives over the last few years makes the progress made so far all the more impressive -- whatever the practical outcome of the talks now underway.

¶10. (SBU) Several reasons can be advanced for why talks may be getting somewhere this time. The opposition parties, having boycotted the flawed presidential elections last year, have finally come around to accepting that President Deby has a mandate to stay in power until 2011, whether they like it or not. President Deby may have determined that election reform is fine now, since the reforms envisaged for the legislative elections will not affect his claim to five more years in power. The EU's new activism, not to mention the 3.27 million euros it has pledged towards electoral reform in Chad and the additional 4.25 million euros it has promised for good governance projects, is also a factor.

NDJAMENA 00000446 003 OF 003

Will We Have a Place at the Table?

¶11. (SBU) The question remains what role the United States should or could play in supporting this effort. In our view, we should be ready to do so, if and when the talks on electoral reform start to produce results and the government and key political actors demonstrate a serious commitment to implementing them. But at this stage, we are only in a position to provide moral support. The FY 2008 budget exercise yielded no resources to use for democracy or governance, notwithstanding our case for making it this mission's top goal. We look forward to working with the Department on possible funding to assist with this critical exercise. Even a small USG contribution (e.g. using an NGO to promote a voter education program) could have a big pay-off in Chad.

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